



Brigade commander COL James C. Yarbrough looks on as departing SETAF commander MG Paul T. Mikolashek holds the colors of the 173rd Airborne Brigade while brigade CSM Lawrence A. Kilgore unfurls them during the Caserma Ederle ceremony.

ONE of the best-known Army units of the Vietnam era was reborn this summer during a brief but moving activation ceremony at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza, Italy. The colors of the famed 173rd Airborne Brigade were uncased as veterans, soldiers of the

newly activated unit, family members and guests looked on.

Inactivated in 1972 following nearly six years of continuous combat in Vietnam, the brigade was resurrected to replace the U.S. Army Southern European Task Force's Infantry Brigade. That organization

was created in 1993 following the inactivation of the Berlin Brigade, an event that left U.S. forces in Europe without a light brigade.

A PROUD HISTORY

The 173rd's activation returns to

RETURN OF THE SKY SO

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the Army's rolls a unit with a history both long and proud. Formed during World War I as the 173rd Infantry Bde., the unit served in that conflict as part of the 87th Division. Inactive between the wars, the brigade was activated in 1942 as the 87th Reconnaissance Troop. Under that designation it saw extensive combat throughout Europe, participating in both the Battle of the Bulge and the crossing of the Rhine River during the final Allied assault on Nazi Germany.

Though inactivated at the end of World War II, the unit was not destined to fade away. In March 1963 the 173rd was activated in Okinawa as a separate airborne brigade under the command of BG Ellis W. Williamson. Over the next few years the unit's paratroopers, dubbed "Sky Soldiers" by Nationalist Chinese troops, trained throughout the Pacific.

In May 1965 the 173rd became the first major Army ground combat unit to deploy to Vietnam and holds the distinction of having conducted the

war's only combat parachute assault. During its years in Southeast Asia the brigade earned 14 campaign streamers and four unit citations. Sky Soldiers were awarded 13 Medals of Honor and more than 6,000 Purple Hearts, though more than 1,700 brigade members gave their lives. The 173rd was inactivated at Fort Campbell, Ky., in January 1972.

PASSING THE TORCH

Many of the former Sky Soldiers who gathered in Vicenza for the activation ceremony saw the unit's return to duty as the logical next step in its continuing history.

"The activation of the 173rd is, to me, like the rising of the phoenix," said Alfred V. Rascon, who received the Medal of Honor for his actions while serving with the brigade in Vietnam. "Here is an organization that's been dormant — but never really gone from the minds of those who served in it — being brought back to

life. The brigade's rich tradition and spirit are being reborn, and it lightens my heart."

"Many of us who served in the 173rd had started to feel like a dying breed, but this activation means the unit will go on," added John Chapla, who also served with the brigade in Vietnam.

"We veterans of the 173rd are part of the brigade's history," Rascon said, "while the young soldiers here today are its future. I think they have the spirit and the heart to carry the banner forward."

Tim Stout, president of the 173rd Abn. Bde. Association, elaborated on



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Story and Photos by Steve Harding



the theme of continuation in his remarks during the activation ceremony.

"We're assembled here today not to mark a new beginning, because a new beginning means there must have been an ending," Stout said. "The 173rd Abn. Bde. never ended.

"Today is the day that we pass on to you the torch we have kept burning so brightly," he said. "I charge you, as the bearers of this torch, to lead the way and to continue with the tradition of historic firsts we established that made the 173rd Abn. Bde. so great."

A NEW GENERATION

The veterans' charge to perpetuate the brigade's history and traditions was one the newest Sky Soldiers accepted with both humility and enthusiasm, according to their commander.

"This day is equally special for the Sky Soldiers of this century who are, in my humble opinion, a perfect fit to carry these traditions on into the 21st century," said COL James C. Yarbrough.

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Retired MG Ellis W. Williamson (center) looks on as a brigade veteran checks out current weapons in a static display area on Caserma Ederle's parade field.

and now they carry this great patch, too. Every one is an ambassador, symbolizing what's best about America and our Army," he said. "We're fully accountable to the spirits of all Sky Soldiers — past, present and future — to carry these colors proudly over the greatest unit in the Army; to serve and, if required, to fight and die under them bravely, for our country, for our Army, for our brigade and for each other."

"We know that you are ready. We also know that you are capable, and that you have the ultimate 'Can Do' attitude," Stout said on

behalf of the veterans. "The 173rd Abn. Bde. is now in your hands, and we know that you will lead the way and continue the historic lineage of the brigade. I am honored to call each and every one of you Sky Soldiers." □

"AIRBORNE!"



The addition of each campaign streamer to the newly uncased 173rd Abn. Bde. colors is marked by a ceremonial blast from a 105mm howitzer.



Brigade soldiers check the campaign streamers that will be added to the 173rd's colors during the ceremony.

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